

CHILE AND THE CIA

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Our Central Intelligence Agency suddenly finds itself the focus of the kind of limelight public attention that no outfit engaged in the espionage business seeks or welcomes.



Sen. Church

President Gerald R. Ford did a lot to put the CIA in this uncomfortable spot. In a moment of excessive candor, he admitted that it had given money to democratic parties and media outlets in Chile. At the time, they were threatened with extinction by Chile's late Marxist president, Salvador Allende. Mr. Ford went on to defend such "intervention" where it served our national interest.

Those remarks stirred up quite a commotion, some of it prompted by genuine concern over letting the CIA mix in the internal politics of other nations. But there was a considerable amount of sheer hypocrisy in the outcry, too.

Sen. Frank Church (D-Ida.) indulged in a hand-wringing, garment-renting, pity-our-poor-country orgy of denunciation.

But Sen. Church has been around long enough to know that the CIA has been involved in what it delicately calls "covert operations" since its establishment.

Such phony grandstanding aside, the dust raised by the Chile affair caused President Ford to call in nine Congressional leaders to discuss whether—

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—should be continued and, if so, under what ground rules. All parties were mum about how the talks went.

In our view, the United States would be most unwise to renounce entirely the use of undercover political tactics. It is admittedly an unsavory business that runs contrary to much in our heritage and traditions.

We must face the reality that in these times aggression is not always heralded by clanking tanks and marching armies; it advances on the little cat feet of subversion.

Lacking a capacity to counter this type of stealthy conquest, we would have to choose between two equally unappealing alternatives: permit it to press ahead unchecked, or meet it with open force.

Covert operations should not be undertaken, however, unless it is imperative to do so, and then only under strictest supervision.

There is some merit to claims by lawmakers that they are entitled to know more than they are now being told about the details of CIA projects.

Better advance briefing may be called for. But if Congress asks and expects fuller information and greater trust from security agencies, it will have to demonstrate its ability to deal responsibly with confidential matters.

Intelligence is vital to our security, and secrecy is essential to effective intelligence work. The more people who have to be told about plans and operations, the greater the risk of leaks.

It would be tragic if the flap over Chile resulted in rules that forced the CIA to work in a fishbowl, so exposed to public view that it could not possibly carry out its assigned mission.

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